"I'm Not Prejudiced, But . . ."
The Nature of Prejudice
Project Commitment, April 13, 1971
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If you read the same newspapers as I do, the same magazines and journals, and watch the same newscasts on television, you are aware that it is today seriously proposed that the American system has failed; that the idea of representative democracy, and the institutions that have evolved out of that concept, are morally corrupt. It is seriously proposed today that the American system cannot deliver on its great, soul stirring promises, and that we are, in fact, living in the last days of a dying nation.

That proposal is made by those on the extreme left who would hasten our national death by way of violent revolution. It is made, equally ominously, by those on the extreme right who would restrict and repress and call it law and order. It is not made, but it is strongly supported, by those in the middle - sometimes referred to as the Silent Majority - whose apathy and unconcern leave the field wide open to the extremes of left and right, and therebye contribute heavily to the demise of the Republic.

I don't buy it for a minute, and I interpret your being here this evening to mean that you aren't buying it either. We have come together for a great purpose - not out of a naive assumption that everything is all right with our country and our system - but out of a deep and abiding love for this nation, and the ideals upon which it is founded, which includes a concern that it change and that the wrongs of the past be righted - not in some future generation, but today.

Time, I believe, is running out. I think what we have set out to do in Project Commitment is extremely important, not only because any common denominator of morality dictates it, but also because history may not afford many more opportunities. Consider this little vignette that I read recently: "Ten years from now or twenty years from now when blacks comprise from one-third to one-half of our major cities, a bill is coming due. Sooner or later

the commonwealth is going to have to decide between the American idea or Facism." 1

It's important what we do here. And my sense of the importance of Project Commitment is fortified by two statements: one from the Old Testament: the Prophet Amos, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." The other from Thomas Jefferson who said: "I tremble for my country when I consider that God is just."

With that by way of introduction let me thank you sincerely for being here. Let me urge you to be faithful in your attendance - even though you may be angered by some of the things you will hear. Let me urge you to be honest and open in the real meat of Project Commitment - the discussion groups that follow each presentation.

I want to do several things this evening: I want to be honest with the topic, namely, The Nature of Prejudice - and the statement "I'm not Prejudiced, but . . .." I'd like, also, to set our effort here in the context of what has happened in race relations in the last decade or so. I'd like, in addition to give you something to think and talk about. And I'd like to do that in less than thirty minutes.

As I begin I am painfully aware of the danger of over-simplification. I shall try not to be superficial. I am also aware that I am white, and middle class; that I have never known personally what it feels like to be the victim of racial prejudice, or poverty. I am also aware that many of you expected a "headliner" to key-note Project Commitment. That fact was brought home to me in a telephone conversation with a very good friend, who observed that I was the first speaker and that it was his impression that we would get someone good - like Jesse Jackson. Well, I'm not Jesse Jackson, nor would it be productive to pretend that I am.

Men have devoted their lives to the study of prejudice. Anybody who

wishes to investigate academically the nature of prejudice cannot overlook two large and significant works: Gunnar Myrdal's "An American Dilemma" published in the late 40's: and more recently, Gordon Allport's "The Nature of Prejudice". In the middle of Allport's book he observes that there is no master key that can unlock the secret of prejudice; but rather a ring of keys, each one important in the process of understanding. There is an abundance of academic definitions, each one with truth to offer. The educator might attribute prejudice to ignorance: the sociologist might say that prejudice is the result of mores and that societal change is the remedy. The historian might trace it to certain piviotal events in the past and urge patience. The psychologist might see prejudice as the expression of frustration and aggression.

All are probably true to a degree. I think in our situation there are two historic roots of racial prejudice, each of which must be honestly faced. The first is the attitude toward the natives of this continent which prevailed in early years and which prevails today. That attitude allowed for the American Indian to be pushed off his land, slaughtered indiscriminately, stolen from, exploited and finally incarcerated in concentration camps which we call reservations. That attitude, and it is a part of the heritage of this nation, is that the White Man's right is always and under every circumstance superior to the Red Man's. In simpler terminology it is that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian."

The second root is the historic fact of slavery. There is no way around that particular fact. There is no way around the fact that just a little more than a century ago, people were being brought to this country in chains, parents torn from children, families disrupted, sold as chattel, treated as property, used for the upbuilding of the White Man's economy, exploited in every way possible. Those people were unlike any of the other groups of people that came to this nation - in two ways: they came as slaves: and they

were black. They are still with us. They constitute ten percent of our population.

Any investigation of prejudice that fails to look squarely at those two facts will flounder in the shoals of superficiality.

Remember the ring of keys: add those two and allow me to suggest one more. The social scientists propose that racial prejudice can be eliminated by rearranging the building blocks of our culture: change a law here; alter a custom there. To that I would add the insight of religion.

The Judeo-Christian tradition, assumes that there is something wrong at the heart of man. We call it by different names: alienation, estrangement, egocentricity, selfishness, sin. Whatever you want to call it, it gets expressed in hostility toward other men. Because men are not what they were created to be, they refuse to live as the family of man God intended. That is to say, there is something about racial prejudice that is innate, inherent in all men. That doesn't excuse or rationalize it: but I think it is by far the most important ring on the key of understanding.

Let's move from that, and without in any way softening our own prejudice, let's acknowledge that every "in" group has an "out" group. A recent Time - Harris Poll [2] revealed that a majority of Israeli's wouldn't want to live beside an Arab, have their children go to school with one: and the vast majority wouldn't want their child to marry one. The late Kyle Haseldon, in his excellent work "The Racial Problem in Christian Perspective" observes that: "The white man is not prejudiced against the black man because he is black, but rather because within all men there are compulsions which, when they erupt in white America, find in the black man, a ready, visible and socially approved victim. Every "in group" has an "out group" upon which it projects all that by its standards is abhorrent and in which, by contrast, it sees its own glorification reflected." [3]

So - let's acknowledge here that we are dealing with a profoundly

complex problem: let's acknowledge that it exists on at least two levels - the personal and the institutional: that intentionally or not, the institutions of this culture were created by and are run by and operate to the benefit of white people. Let's go a step further and call the problem "racism" for that is what it is. Let's defuse that word a little, however, by acknowledging that we are all involved in it; that to a degree it may be unintentional, but that, that disclaimer is irrelevant because it is still the problem.

In that context of racism as a personal and institutional problem, with educational, psychological, sociological, historical - and spiritual - dimensions, I would interpret the statement, "I'm not prejudiced, but . . ." to mean, "I am a racist, but I am expressing my racism in socially accepted ways. In fact, I am not aware of my racism." I think we encounter here the most serious problem of all. White people, generally, do not regard themselves as prejudiced or racist. Frank H. Joyce has written a very perceptive paper on racism in which he observes: "Most whites believe sincerely that they do not discriminate against black people. And indeed, institutionalized, anonymous racism means that many whites do not discriminate in any direct, overt way. They are rarely given the opportunity." [4]

Most white people in a middle-class enclave such as Tippecanoe County have not engaged in picket lines to prevent school integration, nor have they been involved in a lynching - nor any of the kind of activities we are inclined to attribute to the rural South. But we are talking about something a little more subtle than overt racism, and the inability of whites to see it in themselves makes it almost impossible for it to be recognized on an institutional level.

In Joyce's paper, he points to the difference between personal and institutional racism: "Individual racism is represented in the bombing of a Birmingham church building resulting in the death of four black children. The deaths of five hundred black infants in the same city, compared to the

much lower infant mortality rate among whites, is a consequence of institutional, systematic racism." [5]

We will have reached a major mile-post in this country, and in this community, when we muster the courage to confront the horrible ramifications of that kind of statistic; when we are able to see the way quiet personal prejudice that really means no harm to anyone, is translated and amplified in the form of institutional racism. And it is to that process of sensitizing that the succeeding Tuesday nights will be devoted. It is my deepest conviction that it is something that must be done, and that it will demand of those of us who are white a lot of listening, and of those of us who are black, a lot of patience.

So the first problem is sensitivity to the fact that regardless of my color, I am in all probability a racist; and regardless of my intentions I am a participant in institutions that are racist.

To start that process of sensitizing, I would suggest that we examine the roll stereotypes play in our perception of people who are different from ourselves. In terms of our topic, stereotyping means to say, "I'm not prejudiced, but . . ." and then to go on and attribute to a whole race or group of people certain characteristics that have been observed in one person, or more likely, characteristics attributed to that race by our race with no basis in fact.

Obviously, white America has a whole bag of myths, or stereotypes of black people. The entertainment industry, for instance, contributed mightly to the stereotype of the black man as a happy-go-lucky, foot-shuffling, buffoon in the Amos and Andy characterization, and others. Typically, the white stereotype of black people includes a love for watermelons, laziness, superstition, ignorance, athletic and sexual prowess, dirtiness and so on. One might hope that we are growing out of that, but I am told that it is still very real. The story is told, for instance, of Thurgood Marshall, who

was mowing the lawn of his home in a predominantly white district outside Washington. A neighbor lady was walking by and addressed him: "Boy, what does the lady of the house pay you for that?" To which, Mr. Marshall, Solicitor General of the United States at the time, replied, "Nothing ma'm but she does let me sleep with her every night."

We are finally able to laugh at the innane stereotypes of the past, and that is healthy. Archie Bunker, the anti-hero of the television weekly, "All in the Family", drags them all out regularly, in a way that reveals them for what they are. And as we sit there and listen to him recite the litany of racism, we laugh - because the only other response would be to weep.

For the tragedy of stereotyping is that it allows us to rationalize and justify our own racism. Archie Bunker, for instance, can use the stereotype that "colored folk really prefer to live among their own kind" to justify the fact that he just doesn't want to be near them. To stereotype is to debase and demean a man by stripping him of his individuality. It is to do to a man, what a well meaning neighbor did to a friend of mine. She said,""Why, we know you so well we don't even think of you as black." Which is to say, "we can play this game of friendly neighbors so long as we can pretend that you are not who you are." Stereotyping makes the black man, as an individual, invisible to the white man; and most tragic of all, invisible sometimes to himself. Haseldon calls stereotyping ". . . the ultimate assault . . . the final invasion of the last sanctuary of the human soul - a man's right to be!" [6]

It was Aldous Huxley who said:

> "If you call a man a bug, it means that you propose to treat him as a bug. Whereas if you call him a man, it means that you propose to treat him as a man. My profession is to study men. Which means that I must always call men by their name; Always think of them as men; yes, and always treat them as men. Because if you don't treat men as men, they don't behave as men." [7]

You know, no one likes to be the victim of a stereotype. That's what Women's Lib is all about. I find myself resenting the television stereotype of fathers and husbands as harmless, bumblers, who are not too bright and certainly not very strong. And very personally, I resent the going stereotype of clergymen, as a distinct class of people who deserve special treatment, patronization, whose ears - it is presumed - are too delicate for the talk of the street, and who are expected to behave, look, talk and act in strict accord with the accepted pattern. I can only imagine what it must be like - to be placed in a stereotype - always: to live life as a battle to affirm my personhood, my inidviduality, my manhood in a culture that is stacked against me.

"I'm not prejudiced, but . . .", means "I am, but in socially accepted ways." I am sure everyone here could complete the phrase with words that are personal - words which under investigation will reveal a degree of racism. I hope you will try to deal with that in your discussion groups. Here are some starters; some examples of ways I have heard the statement completed.

"I'm not prejudiced, but . . ...

. "I wouldn't want my daughter to marry one." Probably, sooner or later, if we are going to confront the problem of racism, we're going to have to confront that. Let's be honest with it. Let's acknowledge that for many people it is a bitter, distasteful, proposition. Let's have the moral integrity to call it what it is - the last bastion of racism.

"I'm not prujudiced, but . . . .

" They're going too fast. . . . .

I don't want my children to go to school with them

I don't want them in my neighborhood because property values will fall -

We don't have a problem in Lafayette

They have to earn their rights . . .

They're not grateful for all we're doing . . .

They aren't cooperating any more."

And finally, "I'm not prejudiced, but what can I do?"

I'm sure you can add to the list and I would encourage you to do so. Allow me the privilege of commenting on several of them from my personal perspective.

I have lived in this community for less than five years. Changes have occurred and no one can deny the fact that they have. I live in what was initially an all-white neighborhood that now has several black families. That's on the plus side of the ledger. But there is still a lot on the minus side. On two occasions women from my church have been subjected to obscene gestures - while transporting black children to nursery school. Now that makes me angry, and I can only begin to feel the rage of black parents, and I would suggest that so long as that kind of thing happens we have a problem.

"They're not grateful anymore", to which I would respectfully ask, "Why should they be?" Why should people be grateful for rights and privileges guaranteed to all men under the law?

"What can I do?" Well, for starters I can change - my behavior and my attitudes. I can open my mouth when I hear stereotyping being verbalized: I can take exception to my neighbor who says, "they're all right, but you have to draw the line somewhere." I can simply ask "Why?" There are a lot of things I can do.

Very briefly, let's turn our attention now to the new and different situation in which we find ourselves vis a vis race relations. Changes have occurred: laws have changed; the extension of basic rights into education, public accomodations, employment and housing has happened and is happening. My black friends will take issue with that, because there is much to be done. Many of the changes have happened on paper only. My resources tell me, for instance, that there is more segregation in education today than ever before.

Change has happened, but we have a long, long way to go.

In the decade of the 60's black people learned two very important things. They learned the basic political rule of cause and effect: that change happens in response to pressure. They learned that integration, as the white man's gift to the black man, wouldn't work - because white America fought it every step of the way.

Think about that decade of the sixties. It began with the idealism and romanticism of the Civil Rights Movement. If enough people got on the band wagon; if enough people went on pilgrimages to the South; if enough people wrote letters to congressmen, "Freedom Now" would become a reality. More than any other man Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was responsible for that. The high point came in 1963, at one of the largest gatherings Washington, D. C. has ever seen. And King's dream of a society in which all men would be brothers - an integrated society - seemed almost within reach. To listen to that speech today - is to weep at the hope which has now turned to bitterness.

On the heels of 1963 came the assisinations and something called back-lash: hope turned to frustration: "We shall overcome" gave way to "Burn, baby burn". Integration was replaced by something called "Black Power". The turning point for many people came on May 4, 1969, when James Foreman walked down the aisle of Riverside Church in New York City and hurled a series of demands at its minister and people. His rehetoric was Marxist and he was angry.

The liberals were stunned. People who supported Civil Rights felt betrayed. People on the fence scurried to get off. We were in a new ball game and finally everybody knew it. Black America - had finally learned what White America knew all along. "Power is the name of the game."

In the process Black America learned something else as well. That is, that it's not all that bad to be black. In fact, black is beautiful." A whole heritage was rediscovered, and the profound contributions of black people

to this nation was finally held up for everyone to see.

The black man suddenly felt liberated from the futile effort to squeeze into a system that didn't want him - free to rediscover who he was, where he'd been, and to reclaim the identity that had been meticulously stripped away; free to enjoy being black instead of trying to be white. He didn't have to look far for that rediscovering, and what an eye opener it was!

I learned a lot of things that, strangely, were never included in my Civics and History text books. I don't have time to recite what I learned, and again I would hope succeeding Tuesday evenings might sensitize all of us to an ignored part of our heritage. Suffice it to say here, that the black man learned - and hopefully the white man learned - that somehow this people we chained and brought here as slaves survived in spite of white ingenuity: that they not only survived but contributed mightily and significantly to our common heritage.

We are in a new ball game. And it is foolish to pretend that we can return to the past - because we cannot. What does the new situation demand? I think those of us who are white are going to have to learn to stand aside and let the black man find his own way, make his own mistakes, and stop superimposing white solutions to every problem. I think we're going to have to stop paternalizing black people - and by that I mean that subtle arrogance that assumes that we have it within our power to grant a man what is already his as an American, and as a man. I think we are going to have to admit that we are somehow responsible for the black ghetto, and that we have no right to demand white, middle-class behavior from people whose every energy has been sapped trying to survive. I think we're going to have to stop smarting when the people we called niggers call us racists. Institutionally, I think we're going to have to turn things around regardless of what it costs us.

I think we are called today to conversion, to the classic process of confession, penance and rebirth, which might be expressed this way: "I am

prejudiced, but I know it, and I'm dealing with it, and I'm being liberated from it."

The philosopher Pascal once observed "Because men do not fortify justice, they justify force." My deepest conviction is that there is a lot at stake here. We are in the midst of a revolution, and where it all comes out will depend on the attitudes of a lot of white - middle-class people, and a lot of white middle-class communities like our own. What's at stake? Ideas like "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Ideas like, "One nation under God, with liberty and justice for all."

I think we are called today to bear responsibility: to stand up and be counted. I think among the most important words ever uttered were spoken by Abraham Lincoln to the Congress of the United States on December 1, 1862. They are timeless words: they bear repeating; they speak eloquently to us, where we are.

"The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. . . . . Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history. We will be remembered in spite of ourselves. We - even we here - hold the power and bear the responsibility . . . The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just - a way, which if followed, the world will ever applaud and God must forever bless."

FOOTNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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